

REPORT

OF

THE ACTING SECRETARY OF THE INTERIOR,

RELATIVE TO

The swamp and overflowed lands in Louisiana.

AUGUST 26, 1850.

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DEPARTMENT OF THE INTERIOR,
Washington, August 24, 1850.

SIR: I have the honor to transmit herewith a communication from the Commissioner of the General Land Office, dated the 20th instant, with accompanying documents, containing the information relative to the swamp and overflowed lands in Louisiana, called for by the Senate's resolution of the 23d ultimo.

I have the honor to be, sir, very respectfully, your obedient servant,
D. C. GODDARD,
Acting Secretary.

Hon. WM. R. KING,
President of the Senate.

GENERAL LAND OFFICE,
August 20, 1850.

SIR: I have the honor to acknowledge the receipt of the letter from your department of the 25th ultimo, enclosing a resolution of the Senate of the 23d ultimo, in relation to the swamp and overflowed lands in Louisiana; and, in answer to the first part of that resolution, I enclose a copy of the report made to this office on the 25th June last, by the principal clerk of surveys, in relation to these overflowed lands—he having been detailed, by order of the Secretary of the Interior, to go to Louisiana for that purpose.

In answer to the rest of that resolution, I have to state that, of the swamp lands in Louisiana, and those subject to overflow, it is estimated that there have been sold by the United States 1,719,188 acres.

Of the lands which will remain the property of the government after

the swamp and overflowed lands granted by the act of 2d March, 1849, shall have been certified to the State, it is estimated that—

4,700,000 acres have been in market 10 years.

949,413 “ “ “ 20 “

2,000,000 “ “ “ 30 “

This is exclusive of the lands in the Greensburg district. The reasons for excluding these lands from this statement is, that they cannot be classified with the other public lands—the whole of the surveys having been reported as fraudulent in 1837, and a resurvey of the lands and the refunding of the money ordered for those which had been sold by the act of 29th August, 1842.

On the accompanying diagram, the lands that will remain the property of the government after the swamp and overflowed lands have been certified to the State are colored yellow, except those in the Greensburg district. The general character of those lands, from an examination of the field-notes, appears to be poor—scarcely averaging second and third quality; the timber is chiefly pine. Some good lands—even first-rate—are reported on the water-courses, and approaching the “Salt Marsh,” on which the timber is oak, hickory, beech, gum, cypress, &c.; but most, if not all these, have been sold, or are covered by private claims; and it is believed that the unsold lands may be characterized as pine lands, from second quality down to very poor.

The resolution of the Senate is returned.

Very respectfully, your obedient servant,

J. BUTTERFIELD,
Commissioner.

Hon. T. M. T. McKENNON,
Secretary of the Interior.

GENERAL LAND OFFICE,
June 25, 1850.

SIR: By letter of the 17th April last, you instructed me, for reasons therein given, to repair as soon as possible to Louisiana, and, after conference with the governor and surveyor general, to make such reconnaissance of the land along the principal streams as would enable me to understand the nature of the country, and to make such suggestions as will lead to an early and satisfactory settlement of the grant made to that State by the act of 3d March, 1849, to aid in reclaiming the swamp lands therein; and, as early and final action on this subject is represented to be of vital importance to the State, that I should use all diligence to effect the object of my mission, and limit my personal observation to such points, that, aided by reliable information, the object of that mission could be obtained.

In accordance with those instructions, I proceeded to Louisiana by the western route, noting the appearance of the country on both sides of the Mississippi river, and making inquiries in relation to the interior, so as to obtain all the information practicable on the subject.

A brief description of the peculiar topographical features of that section of the country seems to be necessary to a full understanding of its present condition.

On the east side of the Mississippi the lands in the interior appear to be generally high and rolling from the northern boundary of the State to Baton Rouge, where the hills give place to a low, alluvial formation. The river in its serpentine course occasionally approaches those high lands, and, again receding, all the margin of the stream between the points where it comes in contact with the table-land is low and wet. On the right bank of the river throughout the State, for some distance in the interior, it is mostly of that character, and, falling back from the margin of the stream, generally terminates in lakes or swamps.

The average fall from the natural surface of the ground, at the bank of the river, to a distance of forty arpens back from the margin of the stream, has been found by a series of observations, I was informed, to be from fourteen to sixteen feet, and where there is no swamp in the rear, to be twelve feet. Hence, when there is a rise in the river (which frequently happens) the water is precipitated with great force and velocity upon the rear lands. To protect those lands, and to prevent injury to the front, necessarily accruing from such overflows, levees or embankments are thrown up along the bank of the river, of greater or less base and elevation, according to the necessities of the case. Where creeks or bayous enter into the Mississippi their banks must also be leveed or their mouths closed, otherwise the high waters of the Mississippi flow into them and inundate the rear lands.

These levees, on the average, appear to be about five feet high, thirty feet wide at the base, and seven and a half feet wide at top; hence, the constructing and keeping of them in repair are very expensive. Moreover, the current of the river being very rapid and the banks alluvial, those banks are subject to great and rapid abrasions; and, as a matter of prudence and safety, therefore, the levees are, and must be, constructed some distance back from the margin of the stream. Between the levees and the enclosures of the planters space is always left for a public road, that being the highest and driest ground, and therefore best adapted for that purpose, the rear lands being so wet that they are frequently impassable. The proprietors of the lands fronting on the rivers, creeks, bayous, &c., are thus deprived of the use of a considerable portion of their very best lands by the necessity for making these levees and the peculiar topographical features of the country.

From the foregoing description it is evident that all the lands fronting on rivers, creeks, bayous, and water-courses subject to overflow must be protected by safe, strong, and sufficient levees, and that the omission to secure a single tract will bring ruin and desolation on all the adjacent country; and, therefore, all of such lands remaining the property of the government must of necessity be leveed at the expense and cost of the citizens of Louisiana. All the rear lands that are of any value have been reclaimed by the construction and perpetuation of those levees; and thus, so far as any of those lands have been sold by the government, (and it is believed that hundreds of thousands of acres of such lands have been sold,) the government has been so far benefited at the expense of the people of Louisiana, for none of those lands would have been disposed of had they not thus been reclaimed.

It is impossible by any written description to convey an adequate idea of the present condition of a great part of Louisiana; to be realized it must be witnessed. For hundreds of miles I found the whole bank of

the stream under water; and in other places the river, having broken through the embankments or levees, was rushing over the country with the force of a torrent, carrying ruin and destruction in its course. Where the levees were sufficiently high and strong to resist the pressure of the water, the rear lands were inundated by the river flowing through the crevasses or creeks, &c., until the whole, except a few hundred feet of the front land next the levees, was overflowed. A great number of plantations and settlements were entirely submerged, and the only mode of access or egress left to the inhabitants was by boats, or platforms erected where practicable, on frames, above the surrounding waters. This state of things was not limited to the country; some of the villages or towns along the river were in a like condition, the streets being wholly under water. The inhabitants were thus deprived of every opportunity of engaging in any industrial pursuit, and, consequently, of the means of earning subsistence, as the land could not be cultivated; and in many cases there was not sufficient dry ground on which to cut wood for fuel for the steamboats that navigate the river. The cattle had taken refuge on the most elevated spots, and were seeking a scanty subsistence from the leaves of bushes or the tops of the young cane, and frequently, getting into deep water, were carried away by the force of the current and drowned.

The scene for many miles thus presented was harrowing in the extreme, and appeals to every principle of humanity for all the succor and relief that can be extended in the premises. Neither was it temporary in its character, for I was assured by many that it was nearly as bad last year and the year before, and that there had been but little, if any, abatement of the evil since the early part of last January.

It is estimated that property to the amount of millions of dollars has been destroyed; and, although the city of New Orleans and a considerable portion of the southern section of the State have been preserved by the drainage of the surplus water through the crevasses and over the country above, those portions of the State can have no guarantee of an immunity from a like infliction till a radical remedy be applied.

By an examination of the able report on the internal improvements of Louisiana, made by A. D. Wooldridge, esq., State engineer, in January last, a copy of which is respectfully submitted herewith, from my own observation, and from information derived from many intelligent gentlemen living in, or who had recently visited various sections of the State, the impression was made on my mind that all the lands belonging to the government, and most of those the property of individuals, within the following limits, had been submerged during the whole of the present, and a great part of the past year, and that preceding; that is to say, between the Mississippi and Ouachita rivers, extending to the high lands on the west side of the Ouachita; those within some miles on each side of the Upper Red river; those along the Lower Red river; the lands in the southeastern district, and those along the Gulf coast, as shown by the accompanying diagram of the State. The northern boundary of those last mentioned to be determined by actual observation. The lands between East and West Pearl rivers were also designated as of like character. Subsequently, in an interview with the surveyor general and several of the deputies, I was satisfied that this impression was correct.

On conference with his Excellency Joseph Walker, governor of the

State, and R. W. Boyd, esq., the United States surveyor general, and in view of the facts above mentioned, the following seemed to be principles fully embraced by the act of 3d March, 1849, granting the swamp and overflowed lands to the State of Louisiana, and the instructions issued under that law by you, with the concurrence of the Secretary of the Interior, on the 18th April, 1850; they were therefore so considered, to wit:

The agent who may be appointed by the governor to make the selections for the State, if acceptable to the surveyor general, will be appointed by him as a deputy surveyor, and installed as such.

The lands which he may report as falling to the State under examinations already made, or hereafter to be made, will be so regarded.

The examination of the field-notes of the St. Helena or Greensburg district will be conclusive of the lands now resurveyed in that district; and the lands hereafter to be resurveyed will be examined with reference to the grant to the State, and all falling to the State will be so certified, as the surveys are returned examined and approved, except the lands between East and West Pearl rivers; all which, from satisfactory evidence, are regarded as falling to the State under the law.

The lands south of Lake Ponchartrain, &c., can be certified, at once, to the State.

The lands in the southeastern district, between the Ouachita and Mississippi rivers, those along Lower Red river, and those along the Gulf coast, can also generally be certified to the State.

An examination of the field-notes of the surveys on and adjacent to the Sabine and the Upper Red river, and between the Upper Red river and the Ouachita, with the memoranda of the deputies, will be conclusive as to those regions.

The lands already examined by the engineer, assistant engineer, or other officer of the State, in the discharge of their regular duties, and also those which may hereafter be examined in like manner, in connexion with the examination of the field-notes in the office, can at once be certified.

These principles were entirely satisfactory to the governor, and were approved by him; and the opinion entertained was, that the whole grant, so far as the lands were concerned which had been surveyed, could be disposed of in a short time, and at comparatively small expense to the State; and, with reference to those yet to be surveyed, that they would be certified to the State, as the surveys are completed, at a mere nominal cost.

It is but an act of justice to state that, in arranging this matter, I was much indebted to the thorough and accurate knowledge of Mr. Boyd, the surveyor general, in all matters connected with the topography of the country; and that he evinced the most lively interest in carrying out the instructions of this office with a just and proper regard to the intention of the law, the interests of the government, and justice to the State of Louisiana. Though somewhat out of place, I may also be permitted to state that his office was in the most perfect order; the gentlemen employed therein were actively, diligently, and efficiently engaged in their respective vocations; and the voluminous archives of the office were arranged with such system that any paper could be referred to in a moment. The thorough knowledge of the surveyor general of all the complicated duties of his office, enables him to despatch business with a promptness

and energy which otherwise would have been impossible; and, moreover, he seemed to be perfectly acquainted with the history of the origin and various stages of most of the private claims in the State, and the laws and instructions relating thereto. In fine, he is an invaluable officer.

Having thus briefly described the peculiar character of the country, and the action had in relation to the grant made by the act of the 3d of March, 1849, to aid the State of Louisiana in draining the swamp lands therein, I beg leave to present a few suggestions as to the evil under which that State now suffers, the remedy for that evil, and the benefits which will flow from the adoption of that remedy.

By tracing the dividing ridges between the sources of the waters that flow into the Mississippi and its tributaries, and those which flow north into the lakes, east to the ocean, south to the gulf of Mexico, extending west to the Rocky mountains, it will be found that the boundaries thus described extend from the twenty-ninth to the forty-ninth degree of north latitude, and average from the tenth to the twenty-seventh degree of longitude west from Washington, embracing an area of about one million two hundred and sixty-nine thousand square miles.

This region has been settled with unexampled rapidity; and as improvements keep pace with the settlements, it is reasonable to suppose that the whole country is now more rapidly and thoroughly drained into the Mississippi than when in a state of nature. Then no doubt a great quantity of water was collected in pools and swamps, and there remained until carried off by gradual evaporation. This, of course, so far relieved the bed of the stream; but as the lands are opened up by cultivation, this water is discharged at once into the river, thus adding to its volume.

This it is believed is one of the causes of the great increase in the waters of the Mississippi for the few past years; but whether it is the principal cause or not I cannot say, as I have not the data to enable me to come to a satisfactory conclusion in the matter.

All the water collected in the immense region above mentioned, except that carried off by evaporation, has no outlet but the Mississippi, and the regions in the south inundated by it. The facts presented to the eye are sufficient to show that the river with a bed averaging not more than a mile in width through the lower part of the State, and towards its outlet, is not sufficient to carry off the surplus water thus accumulated. No labored calculation of the amount of water collected, and of the capacity of the river, is required to prove this truth—it is established in heart-rending evidences of the sufferings of our fellow-citizens in that region. The questions, then, arise, in what way and by what means shall the evil be abated? The old system of leveeing has been found, by many years of patient trial, to be insufficient, and in adopting a new plan, permanent security should be the great desideratum.

In considering this subject, it must be remembered that the State of Louisiana is not the only sufferer from this undue accumulation of water in the Mississippi. Portions of Arkansas, Missouri, and Mississippi are in like condition, and any means adopted with reference to Louisiana alone must, to a considerable extent, prove abortive, so long as the overflow from the Mississippi finds its way through the States above to the low lands of that State.

The first suggestion in relation to this matter is to make such improvements in the bed of the river as will enable it to discharge the greatest

amount of water in the least time. This can be done, after a careful survey of the stream, by straightening its channel, commencing at the Gulf of Mexico, and working upwards as far as necessary. This would abridge considerably the length of the stream, increase its velocity somewhat, cause it to deepen its channel, keep it clearer of obstructions than it now is, and have a tendency to prevent the abrasions of its banks. Those abrasions are now chiefly found in the bends, where the waters rushing with great force against the alluvial shores continually wash them away, and increase the evil from year to year.

The plan heretofore adopted to some extent, of straightening the channel of the river at certain points high up the stream, has become deservedly unpopular, for the reason that this partial effort only removes the evil from one point to throw it with aggravated force and effect upon another. But I am convinced that a system of this kind, adopted and followed out as suggested, would tend very much to the accomplishment of the desired object, and that, too, without so materially increasing the current of the river as to interfere injuriously with its navigation.

The next suggestion is, by the construction of levees at some distance inland from the margin of the river, of such breadth of base and top that they can be used for roads—the elevation to depend upon the necessities of the case. By using these levees as roads, they will be kept constantly hard and compact, and any injury to them will at once be noticed and repaired.

The present levees to a great extent are found to be insufficient, and hence, in constructing new ones the best plan should be adopted, and that plan should be uniform.

The third suggestion, and that which would obviate the necessity of elevating those levees above a very moderate height, is, to open the natural outlets on the sides of the river which have been closed by artificial means, and which, before being so closed, acted as safety-valves to carry off the mass of water that now inundates the country, or by opening new outlets in the shape of canals at points where formations can be found of such character that the banks will not be subject to wash or abrasion.

These canals should be cut to the swamp, and, if necessary, their sides could be leveed, to prevent the water drained by them from spreading abroad over the country. Trenches or canals should also be cut through the lowest parts of the swamps between the streams, and these should be connected with each other, and with the bayous and sloughs that traverse the country. As many branches or outlets as may be necessary to carry off the surplus water of the river could thus be made into the gulf, and the overflow of the river be controlled and directed, so that large bodies of land, now swampy or overflowed even at dry seasons, would be reclaimed; and an invaluable system of internal communication by canals effected, sufficient to convey the produce of every plantation to market.

It is true that these improvements will be expensive. The amount of the cost I have not attempted to calculate; nor can it be done with any degree of accuracy until the necessary surveys have been made. It has been supposed that it may amount to six or ten millions of dollars. Admitting that it will cost the greater sum, or even double that amount, the expense would be of no consideration in comparison to the benefits that would flow from it.

The destruction of property and crops this season by the overflow has been estimated to amount to five or seven millions of dollars, a recurrence of which can hereafter be prevented by these improvements. Moreover, about three or four millions of acres of land will be reclaimed, which otherwise would continue to be valueless. These lands are as fruitful as any in the world, and by proper cultivation would yield abundant crops of sugar and cotton—the great staples of the South. This increase of these articles, according to the laws of trade, would reduce the price of them; and thus all the citizens of the United States would be so far benefited.

The expense of making these improvements, as already stated, will be very heavy; much more in fact than can be realized from the munificent grant made by Congress to aid in this object, however liberally that grant may be construed. The balance must be raised by taxing the inhabitants who have already contributed millions for this purpose, and whose means have been seriously impaired by the disasters of the past and present years; unless Congress, regarding the matter in its true light as one of national importance, should further extend the grant for this purpose so as to include all the public lands in the State, which, in view of all the circumstances of the case, I respectfully recommend.

The whole question, it seems to me, has resolved itself into the alternative, that relief must be speedily extended, or the low lands of Louisiana abandoned. The latter alternative would be ruinous to thousands who have spent fortunes in purchasing and improving those lands; and, by reducing the amount of the annual crop of sugar and cotton in our country, would increase the price of those articles, compel us to depend for the deficiency thus caused on foreign countries, and prove seriously inconvenient to a great number of our citizens.

The State of Louisiana has within itself the means of exhaustless wealth. With a soil of unbounded and inexhaustible fertility, it has one of the most delightful and salubrious climates in the world, despite the consequences of these overflows, which would have converted most other countries into vast burial places.

The fervid heat of the summer enables its citizens to enjoy all the luxuries and delights of the tropics; and yet that heat is so moderated by the prevalence of cool and refreshing breezes, that a delightful residence can be found in almost any part of the State. With the improvements now required, Louisiana will soon become one of the first States of the Union in wealth, population, and importance, as she has within herself all the elements necessary to this end.

All of which is most respectfully submitted, by

Your obedient servant,

JNO. WILSON,

Principal Clerk Surveys.

HON. J. BUTTERFIELD,

Commissioner of the General Land Office.

